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ABSTRACT

This paper sees existing academic communities the following way: faculty centered, discipline centered, competitive in nature, static in structure, lecture based "teaching," banking concept of learning, one dominant discourse--"Standard English," narrow in research interests, and focus on individual achievement of faculty and students. The paper advances the idea of the Writing across the Curriculum (WAC) community as being different in nature: student and faculty interaction centered, a learning community, focus on pedagogy, focus on student learning and their learning needs, recognition that a student's language is the beginning point of learning, focus on the audience role in communication, focus on the necessity of social context, and willingness to allow questioning of the "givens." The paper outlines the following points: academic institutions by their nature block the kind of successful learning community necessary for WAC to thrive; negative response to faculty who do engage in WAC practices; competitive nature of Academia works against a WAC community; the ideal academic community; no true learning communities exist where faculty do not question the "givens" of their discipline; WAC forces a "contact zone" between "nominal communities" of academe and learning communities of WAC; WAC subverts "communities" based on privilege, rank, and the dominant discourse; and WAC in its 25 years of WAC theory, research, and practice has spawned a number of learning communities. (NKA)

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Reconstructing Notions of Community in Academe: The Subversive Nature of WAC.

by Eileen M. Meagher

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Reconstructing Notions of Community in Academe: The Subversive Nature of WAC

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Existing Academic Communities: Faculty centered, discipline centered, competitive in nature, static in structure, lecture based "teaching," banking concept of learning, one dominant discourse- "Standard English, " narrow in research interests, focus on individual achievement of faculty members and of students.

The WAC Community is different in nature from the foregoing kinds of communities: "Student and faculty interaction" centered, a learning community, focus on pedagogy, focus on student learning and on students' learning needs, recognition that a student's language is the beginning point of learning, focus on the role of audience in communication, and focus on the necessity of social context, willingness to allow questioning of the "givens."

- More personally demanding of both students and instructor
- More personally revealing of students and instructor
- Tends to become a tightly knit social community which includes both faculty and students
- Psychological vulnerability of members

- Results in more connected learning
- Changes both faculty and students for the better
- More personally rewarding for both faculty and students
- Does not see other disciplines as rivals or "the enemy."

Academic institutions by their nature block the kind of successful learning community necessary for WAC to thrive. (Art Young, Thomas A. Angelo)

- WAC exists in a structure that fundamentally opposes it.
- Academic institutions organized by disciplines; WAC is interdisciplinary in nature
- WAC viewed as a remedial program, as a temporary program, a quick fix
- English departments are responsible for student writing instruction
- English departments reluctant to tenure and promote faculty in composition and yet want to control writing (Writing is a talent, not a learned craft). Most literature faculty themselves do not use writing as a means of learning.
- The academic myth that writing in educational settings should be used to test students' knowledge, not to help students learn. (Result: standardized tests, which promote formula teaching and learning and ultimately mediocre teaching and learning. WAC promotes innovative teaching)
- Institutional reward system values research, publications, and grants more than undergraduate or graduate teaching
- Teacher's job is to dispense knowledge; students' job is to be obedient receptacles (result: emphasis on memorizing).

- WAC focuses on helping students learn, less on covering content -- the sacred cow of academia
- Fear of student resistance. Writing is hard work and students dislike hard work.
- Faculty resistance because of apathy, insecurity, hostility. See WAC as a criticism of their current teaching methods, as antithetical to their own self-interests. WAC teaching takes time, valuable time that could be spent on research. WAC perceived as additional burden
- WAC problematizes professional identities of traditional faculty

Negative response to faculty who do engage in WAC practices

- Those faculty are often the butt of cynical jokes.
- Members can be subject to rebuke by department heads and senior faculty
- WAC community can split departments ideologically
- WAC community can jeopardize jobs of non-tenured Faculty

Competitive nature of Academia works against a WAC community

Competitive nature fostered by "Compartmentalized Academic Administration," "Traditional Reward System," "Entrenched Attitudes," "Testing and Quantification," and for writing "English Department Orthodoxy." (Fulwiler and Young) View of process and the teaching of writing as "women's work." WAC threatens the traditional role of males in academe and adversarial modes of learning. **It is not surprising that a WAC community tends to subvert existing academic "communities."**

Ideal academic community (Donna LeCourt, author of "WAC as Critical Pedagogy: The Third Stage")

- Faculty who together are willing to question, research the history that fosters the hegemony of the narrow discourse of their discipline.
- Faculty who invite students to question discipline boundaries, discipline discourse; who provide the kinds of activities that allow students to become naturally and socially engaged in learning and internalizing how to determine in concrete rather than abstract ways the value of disciplinary information.
- Faculty who value students' discourses as much as disciplinary ones.
- Academic institutions which place primary emphasis upon effective and innovative pedagogy.
- Academic institutions that reward first and foremost effective pedagogy.
- Academic institutions that reward the kind of research that flows from questions and concerns about what constitutes effective pedagogy within a discipline.
- Institutions and faculty who know how to integrate EQ with IQ in their teaching.
- Faculty who are knowledgeable about different learning styles and who do not privilege the linear mode as the superior and only mode.
- Academic institutions that unify learning (artificial separations among the disciplines)

No true learning communities where faculty do not question together the "givens" of their discipline, the nature of its discourse, the boundaries it erects between itself and other disciplines. (These are the very areas that present students their greatest problems.) Disciplines regard themselves as discrete discourse communities as they should but in so doing ignore in their

teaching the wider social discourses that have shaped their particular discourse as well as the differences their discourse is designed to silence, prohibit, and marginalize (differences in family background, gender, race, worldly goods). In his book, *Fragments of Rationality*, Lester Faigley argues that this" . . holistic and closed notion of community encourages a simplified view of a discursive field, where the influences of contradictory and multiple discourses that one encounters in daily life are minimal." A WAC community provides a fruitful "contact zone," to use Mary Louise Pratt's words from her article titled "Arts of the contact Zone," where the specialized discourse of a discipline and the multiple discourses of a group of students (discourses of gender, culture, religion and politics) can illuminate each other and thus facilitate both learning and teaching.

WAC forces a "contact zone" between "nominal communities" of academe and learning communities of WAC. (Mary Louise Pratt, "Arts of the Contact Zone")

The kind of community, which is the result of WAC, puts traditional paradigms and identities and communities on the line. It compels faculty to foreground the question "what constitutes 'proper' discourse?" David Bleich, in his article "Genders of Writing," says, "Academic discourse works in a tradition of deliberately excluding experience, of aiming to purify thought of both experience and feeling so that some ideal of pure truth, linked to the intellectual formulations of one or a few men, may somehow miraculously come to preside over everyone's common experience of living." Bleich quotes Richard Ohmann, author of *English in America*, "Under the aegis of 'standard English' given in expository prose and academic discourse, students are taught to separate language from themselves, their local interests, their groups and communities, and their own history of language use." Ohmann makes the point that because the politics of "Standard English" are anonymous, "Standard English" is made out to be objective and fair.

WAC subverts "communities" based on privilege, rank and the dominant discourse.

Mary Louise Pratt, author of the article, "Arts of the Contact Zone," argues that the "…lecturer's traditional task (is) unifying the world in the students' eyes by means of a monologue that rings equally coherent, revealing, and true for all, forging an ad hoc community, homogeneous with respect to one's own words -- this task is not only impossible but anomalous and unimaginable." In teaching a class called "Cultures, Ideas, Values," she and her collaborators "... had to work in the knowledge that whatever one did was going to be systematically received in radically heterogeneous ways that we were neither able nor entitled to prescribe."

The true learning community

- Understands that language cannot be reified, that it is a living dynamic symbol system trèmendously varied and always changing.
- Invites students to employ their own discourses to question, critique, and learn (Art Young's story)
- Promotes mutual respect and the ability to listen and value differing points of view.
- Recognizes that there are diverse learning styles and refuses to privilege the linear or dominant style. Respects that learning is recursive. Normal to forget if one does not continually practice.
- Changes the role of the instructor from an assumed authority occupying center stage to a reliable, participating respondent and guide.
- Advocates collaborative learning, group work, and reduction or elimination of grading for particular pieces of writing.

WAC in its 25 years of WAC theory, research and practice has spawned a number of learning communities (Thomas A. Angelo in his article "Seven Promising Shifts and Seven Powerful Levers: Developing More Productive Learning (and Writing Communities Across the Curriculum).

- Critical thinking across the curriculum
- Ethics across the curriculum
- Computer literacy across the curriculum
- Oral proficiency as in public speaking or presentation
- Teaching and learning centers for faculty across the disciplines

Angelo himself was profoundly changed by WAC teachers, scholars, and their work. He says that he sees "shifts already underway that could lead to campus cultures that are both more collegial and more productive." Factors causing these shifts include:

- Dwindling federal funds for research
- Increasing competition for public support at state and local levels
- Competition for students and tuition dollars
- Pressures from parents and students for better instruction
- Threat of competition from for-profit distant education and instructional technologies
- Employers' calls for better-educated students
- Demands from legislatures and boards of trustees for better results and more accountability
- Our graduates need well-developed teamwork skills to thrive in the workplace
- Faculty need similar skills in order to help students

- Recent explosion of newsletters, conferences, books, listservs, and web sites focused on teaching and learning testify to faculty hunger for the kind of community of scholars they expected to find in academic life.

The shifts include:

- From a culture of largely unexamined assumptions to a culture of inquiry and evidence. The demand for assessment at all levels can speed this shift.
- From a culture of implicitly held individual hopes, preferences, and beliefs to a culture of explicit, broadly shared goals, criteria and standards. The demand for clear, research based methods for setting goals, criteria and standards is speeding this shift.
- From a teaching culture that ignores what is known about learning to one that applies relevant knowledge to improve practice. Speeding this shift is the growth in research and practice literature on teaching and learning and the growth in the number of institutions which have centers for teaching and learning.
- From a narrow definition of scholarship to a broader, more inclusive vision of scholarship. Changes in faculty evaluation systems (use of portfolios) are speeding this shift.
- From a model of higher education as primarily a quantitative process to one that is fundamentally qualitative and transformative. The lever that can drive this shift is competency-based, mastery learning.
- From a culture that emphasizes and privileges individual struggle for private advantage to one which encourages collaboration for the common good and individual advancement. Cooperative and collaborative methods can speed this process.

Angelo stresses, however, that the thoroughness and speed of such shifts are up to faculty who must be willing for the short term to forego institutional rewards for personal rewards. He also reminds us that truly cynical faculty will never be convinced and we should leave them to plan their retirements.

But apart from the testimonies of individual faculty and students, have WAC and other learning communities produced better learning and teaching?

Research (by Tinto, Love, and Russo 1993") shows that learning communities produce significant gains in student involvement, learning, satisfaction, social connectedness, persistence and retention for all kinds of students -- remedial and non-remedial students in community colleges and students in research universities.

The Business World has long made use of learning communities to great advantage.

Angelo refers to author Peter Senge, well known in the business world for his work in Total Management Quality. Senge suggests in his book *The Fifth Discipline* (1990) that the transformation to a learning based education requires the development of five disciplines i.e. five well developed ways of thinking and acting:

- Personal mastery
- Mental models
- Shared vision
- Team learning
- Systems thinking

(Art Young "The Wonder of Writing Across the Curriculum")

- Recognition that WAC must be the ongoing overarching denominator in every academic institution
- Institutional commitment to provide necessary support ideologically and financially
- Commitment of individual teachers to the principles of WAC
- Supportive University and Faculty community
- Focus on writing to learn as well as on learning to write
- Focus on writing to communicate to real life audiences
- Understanding writing as social process
- Understanding of writing as social action